Jean Bonga (Bonza)—*the first "White man" dans la Pays d'en Haut*

By Darcy John Bouchard *dit* li Exŏuīle © 2025, Revised

George Bongo (c. 1802–1874)

Stephen Bongo (1799-1884)

The first "White man" *dans la Pays d'en Haut*

Captain Daniel Robertson (born in 1733 at Dunkeld, Scotland) was **appointed Surgeon's mate of the 42nd Foot Regiment** in 1754—and, in June of that year, he transferred with the rest of his regiment to **Albany, NY**; in 1760, he was at ***the capture of Montréal*** and, about this time, *he* married **Marie-Louise Reaume** (widow of Joseph Fournière de Vezon);

Daniel and Marie-Louise's children were (*as follows*):

Margaret (b. abt.1781) (m. Donald Sutherland)
Elizabeth (m. Louis-Hypolite Hertel)
Charlotte (m. Dr. John Farries)
John (m. Miss Christy in 1794)

Robertson was commander of the newly-built fort on **Mackinac Island** (from 1782-to-1787)—having arrived there-at with his wife, daughter and two Negro slaves: **Jean Bonga (Bonza)** (? – 20 01 1795) and **Marie-Jeannie** (which were the ***fortunes of war*** *he'd* ***won*** for his part ***in the capture of Montréal***). [Note: **Reaume** is an important Métis family name which turns up often in trading records from Michilimackinac, Tadoussac, Green Bay and Mackinac.]

By 1787, Robertson left the British Army and was operating ***a small tavern on Mackinac Island***—it was about this time that he freed his slaves: Jean and Marie Bonza.

Daniel Robertson died (age 77) on 5 April 1810 at Montréal.

With ***Jean Nicolas Marchesseaux*** as a witness, Jean Bonga (Bonza) married Marie-Jeanne by the church on 25 June 1794 at **Michilimackinac** (see ☒ on map of pays d'en haut below).

Once liberated, Bonga (Bonza) explored the unknown regions of woodland at the far western end of Lake Superior.

He was recognized as ***the first "White man" dans la Pays d'en Haut*** (*i.e.*, the Great Lakes region) [1] by the natives because they had never seen a White man before—and they did not judge him by the colour of his skin but by what they had heard "White men" looked like: *that is* by tricorner hats, coloured waistcoats (with buttons, ribbons and other trimmings), knee britches and shoes with big buckles. But what defined him as a "White man" more than anything else was his "bangstick" *Sic.*—a magick totem that killed warriors from a distance with a loud bang and smoke just by pointing it at them *viz.* a flintlock musket, which the Stone Age heathens hadst never seen before. It gave him great power amongst the savages, which welcomed him and his wife and adopted their family into the tribe.

Marie-Jeanne's descendants were *all* involved in the fur-trade and married into the Ojibwa tribe in Lake Superior territory.

la Pays d'en Haut (*i.e.*, the Great Lakes region)
A 1755 map of the Pays d'en Haut by Jacques Nicholas Bellin

[1] The ***Pays d'en Haut*** (French: *Upper Country*) was a territory of Nouveau France covering ***the regions of North America located west of Montréal***. The vast territory included most of ***the Great Lakes region***, expanding west and south over time into the North American continent as the French *had* explored. The Pays d'en Haut was established in 1610 and dependent upon the colony of **Québec** until 1763, when the **Treaty of Paris** ended New France, and both were ceded to the British as the **Province of Quebec**.

The French settlements dans la Pays d'en Haut which were south of the Great Lakes included (*as follows*): **Detroit**, **La Baye**, **Sault Sainte-Marie**, **Saint Ignace**, and **Vincennes**. *Vincennes was later attached to* ***Pays des Illinois****, which was part of Louisiana. By 1773, the population of Detroit was 1400. By 1778, its population was up to 2144*.

Protecting the Pays d'en Haut were four forts: **Fort Presque Isle** (1753), **Fort Le Boeuf** (1753), **Fort Duquesne** (1754), and **Fort Machault** (1754).

A 1717 French map of la Pays des Illinois (Illinois Country)

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In July of 1820, ***Henry R. Schoolcraft*** wrote in his **"*Narrative Journal of Travels*"** of visiting "three miles above the **St-Louis River**" where there was a small village of fourteen lodges and containing a population of about sixty souls. Among these he noticed a Negro who had long been in the service of the fur companies and who had married a squaw [*Sic.*], by whom he had four children which were "black as their father," having the "curly hair and glossy skin of the native African."

Pierre (Mukdaweos) Bonga (abt.1780 - ?) *son of Jean and Marie-Jeannie Bonga* married **Ogibwayquay—*an Ojibwe woman*** and they had the following children together (*as follows*):

- **Marguerite**—she was born 1797-98 in the Lake Superior area [ ] and *she* died in 1880.
  She married **Jacob Fahlstrom** in 1823 at Fond du Lac (*q.v.*).
- **Stephen**—he was born in June of 1799 at Park Point—*opposite Wisconsin Point* (*in today's Canal Park Duluth, near Superior, Wis.*) [ ] and *he* died in 1889.
  He married **Susan**…
  He was a notable ***fur trader*** and ***translator*** in the region.
- **George**—was born circa 1802, *near Duluth, Mn.* [ ] and *he* died in 1884.
  He was a ***polygamist*** and took ***two Ojibwe wives***…
- **Blanche Bonga**—was born circa 1802 at **Henry's Pembina River post**, North Dakota, United States
- **Jack "Aynodahgun" Bonga**—was born circa 1817.
- **Jean Baptiste Bonga**

Pierre Bonga was employed by **J. Sayer & Co.** in 1795 at **Fond du Lac**; but, he was also employed by the **North-West Co.**, the **South West Co.** and the **American Fur Co.** in their Fond du Lac Departments. Pierre was a relatively successful trader… and he could afford to send his son George to Montréal for an education.

Marguerite Bonga & Oza-windib

In 1793, the Cree wiped out a band of Gros Ventre near South Branch House. The incident greatly accelerated resentments shared by the Blackfoot and Gros Ventre against the trading success of the Cree and Assiniboine, which made possible their arms superiority. In the eyes of the Gros Ventre, the HBC was allied to their enemies—and an enemy. They responded to Cree raids by attacking the Company's Manchester House (on Pine Island in the Saskatchewan River): They looted it in the same year and destroyed it the next. Eventually, like the Shoshoni, they were pushed off.

In contrast to the Gros Ventre, the Cree and Assiniboine were still expanding—stopped in the southwest by the Blackfoot—erstwhile allies when the Shoshoni were a common enemy, but now each others worst foe.

It was during this time that ***the first child other than of aboriginal blood*** was born there-at on North Dakota soil: The child was not White, though, but a Nègres: **Marguerite Bonga** *daughter of Ogibwayquay* (*Ojibwe*) *and Pierre* "*Mukdaweos*" *Bonga son of Jean and Marie-Jeanne Bonga* (*Bonza*) was born circa 1797-98 in the Lake Superior area [ ] (*she died in 1880*). Marguerite married Swedish-born **Jacob Fahlstrom "Oza-windib (Yellow-hair)"** (1793–1859) in 1823 at Fond du Lac—*infer*.

Oza-windib was employed by **John Sayer & Co.**, in 1795, at Fond du Lac – he was also employed by the **North-West Co.**, the **South-West Co.** and the **American Fur Co.** in their **Fond du Lac Departments**.

John Sayer was born in 1750; he had a long career in the fur-trade beginning in the late 1770s—which ended with his retirement to the west end of l'Île de Montréal in 1805-07; in 1780, *though*, he was at **Leech Lake** as an agent for **Joseph Howard of Michilimackinac**; by 1791, he had formed John Sayer & Co., trading in the Lake Superior region (*the area of today's northern Minnesota*). Between 1793 and 1805, he was a trader for the NWC. John Sayer married ***Obemauunoqua*** *daughter of Mamongazida* ("*Big Foot*")—with a second marriage to ***Elizabeth McPherson*** and five children.

In 1804, Pierre Bonza (Bonga) became an interpreter for the NWC on the lower Red River: (Charles Chaboillez (proprietor), Alexander Henry the Younger, J.B. Desmarais, Francois Coleret, Antoine Déjarlet, and Louis Giboche).

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Stephan Bonga

Stephen Bonga was proud of his role in the non-Native population and often made the confusing boast of being ***"the first White child born at the Head of the Lakes"*** (*i.e., the region near the present-day cities of Duluth, Minnesota, and Superior, Wisconsin*). As a young man, he was sent away for an education to become a **Presbyterian** missionary; but, he quit school and returned to the **Lake Superior** area where he married ***an Ojibwe woman*** and entered the fur trade as an interpreter. With brothers George and Jack, he spent the winter of 1823-1824 with an **American Fur Company** party at a post named "**Fort Misery**" (*near the present location of Grand Portage National Monument*).

Promoted to the position of clerk, Stephen Bonga enjoyed considerable responsibility as he advanced in the fur trade hierarchy. He traded for the company in the ***border lakes region of northern Minnesota and western Ontario*** between 1827 and 1833. And, as ***a clerk***, *he* frequently traveled through the waterways that would later become **Voyageurs National Park**. Stephen ventured widely during his lifetime and canoed on **Lake Superior** and many of the waterways of the ***western Great Lakes region***, including the area that would later become the **St. Croix National Scenic Riverway**. In later life, after he left the fur trade, he served as a ***guide*** and ***interpreter*** for artist **Eastman Johnson**. He accompanied Johnson during his Lake Superior travels to the areas of present-day **Grand Portage National Monument**, **Apostle Islands National Monument**, and **Isle Royale National Park**, where the artist sought subjects to portray.

George Bonga

George Bonga was a respected fur trapper, guide and interpreter who had arrived at **Leech Lake** in the early 1800s. He was born of a Black father and Ojibwe mother; moreover, he was a ***polygamist*** and had ***two Ojibwe wives***: (His descendants may be found in many Ojibwe bands today).

Having attended school in **Montréal**, Bonga spoke fluent English, French, and Ojibwe—and, as part of the mixed racial and cultural groups that connected trading companies and American Indians, he often advocated for the Ojibwe in their dealings with trading companies and the government. He *also* frequently guided White immigrant settlers and traders through the region—and worked as a fur trader with the **American Fur Company**.

While working for the fur company, George Bonga drew the attention of **Governor Lewis Cass**.[2] Cass hired Bonga at **Fond du Lac**, as a ***guide*** and ***interpreter*** for negotiations with the Ojibwe, later achieving wealth and prominence as ***an independent trader*** at

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[2] **Lewis Cass** (9 October 1782 – 17 June 1866) was an American military officer, politician, and statesman. Cass was a **Freemason** and co-founded the **Grand Lodge of Michigan**. He represented **Michigan** in the United States Senate and served in the Cabinets of two U.S. Presidents: ***Andrew Jackson*** and ***James Buchanan***. As **Secretary of War** under Andrew Jackson, Cass helped implement Jackson's policy on the **Indian Removal Act (1830)**.

While it was directed chiefly against the Southeastern tribes, especially the **Five Civilized Tribes**, it also affected tribes in ***Ohio***, ***Illinois*** and other areas east of the **Mississippi River**. Most were forced to **Indian Territory** (*in present-day Kansas and Oklahoma*), but a number of bands negotiated being allowed to remain in ***Michigan***.

Cass was *also* the **1848 Democratic presidential nominee** and a leading spokesman for the **Doctrine of Popular Sovereignty**, which held that the White people in each territory should decide whether-or-not to permit slavery. Moreover, he unsuccessfully sought to buy land from ***Mexico*** and sympathized with ***American filibusters in Latin America***. Cass resigned from the Cabinet on 14 December 1860 in protest of Buchanan's failure to protect federal interests in the South and failure to mobilize the federal military, actions that might have averted the threatened secession of Southern states.

Leech Lake. Bonga's signature is on treaties brokered in 1820 and 1867, *respectively*.

As a translator **George Bonga** would have had to earn the trust of both sides in all negotiations, and he often moved between White and First Nations communities. Comfortable in White and Ojibwe society, Bonga identified with both—and, *reportedly*, called himself ***"one of the first two White men in Northern Minnesota."*** He, *of course*, was not speaking of the color of his skin but instead about his participation in ***Euro-American culture***. However, he also spoke against White men who treated Ojibwe people unfairly. Bonga wrote letters on behalf of the Ojibwe complaining to the State government about individual Indian agents in the region. His letters, which point out both his connections to the White government and the Ojibwe, further illustrate the ways that Bonga traversed cultural boundaries during this period.

A noteworthy incident in George Bonga's life occurred in 1837. That year, an Ojibwe man named **Che-ga-wa-skung** was ***accused of murdering a White man*** at **Red Cedar Lake** (*known now as Cass Lake*). Though initially in custody, Che-ga-wa-skung escaped. According to contemporary accounts, Bonga trailed the man over five days and six nights during the winter, eventually catching him. Bonga brought the man back for trial. In one of the first criminal proceedings in the area, Che-ga-wa-skung was tried and acquitted.

Bonga's actions were unpopular with some of the Ojibwe, but he continued living with or near them for the rest of his life. Five years after the incident he married **Ashwinn**, an Ojibwe woman, and they had four children together. In the same year (1842), the **American Fur Company** folded.

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Stephan Bonga was on the **Death March to Sandy Lake** in the 1850s and, on the **Sandy Lake Annuity Role**, was listed #79 with the Fond du Lac Band.

George Bonga continued to work as a trader and opened a lodge on Leech Lake with his wife. For many years they welcomed travelers to their lodge: (In 1856, ***Charles Flandrau*** spent two weeks at Bonga's lodge). According to the reports of some of those travelers, Bonga enjoyed telling stories of early Minnesota and singing. As the fur trade declined, Bonga turned to the Indian trade. He monitored annuity payments to the Ojibwe and worked with local Indian agents. In 1867, Bonga's name appears as translator on a treaty between Whites and Ojibwe at White Earth. His business changed with the times and by 1870 he was a retired dry goods merchant.

1874 is generally agreed upon as the year of George Bonga's death.

Stephen Bonga died in 1884 near his birthplace, a well respected member of both the Indian and White communities of the Minnesota-Wisconsin border region.

Though the spelling is different, Bungo Township in Cass County is named after George Bonga's family.

Minnesota Historical Society

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Portrait of Stephen Bonga pictured with a hat and walking stick.

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